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ABSTRACT

Premarital sexual attitudes of a convenience sample of 95 young unmarried college women were examined to ascertain the association between liberality of premarital sexual attitudes, religiosity, conservatism, self-reported premarital sexual behavior, and self-esteem. SPSS Pearson Correlation analysis showed different patterns for the group as a whole and for the sexually experienced sub-group of 51 women. For the group as a whole, liberality of sexual attitudes was negatively associated with religiosity and conservatism, positively associated with self-reported sexual behavior, and not significantly associated with self-esteem. For the sexually experienced sub-group, liberality of sexual attitudes was negatively associated with religiosity and conservatism, and showed some positive associations with self-esteem. These results suggest a straightforward association between religiosity, conservatism, and sexual behavior, but suggest that the linkage between these factors and self-esteem is more complex than expected. (Author)

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COLLEGE PREMARITAL SEX
VERSUS SELF-ESTEEM, RELIGION, AND POLITICS

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COLLEGE PREMARITAL SEX
VERSUS SELF-ESTEEM, RELIGION, AND POLITICS

Do sexual permissiveness women have low self-esteem? Are religion and political conservatism importantly associated with lowered sexual permissiveness? This paper focuses on sexual attitudes of unmarried undergraduate college women, and how these correlate with past experiences of sexual experience, self-esteem, political attitudes, and religiosity, as well as how they change during a semester of a family relationship course.

Past literature has suggested connections between all these factors.

Self-Esteem

Stratten and Spitzer (1967) suggest that sexual permissiveness should be associated with low self-esteem, since they regarded such permissiveness as a deviation from society's norms, and since they thought of self-esteem as goodness-of-fit between ones norms and ones behaviors. The four attitudinal questionnaires they used supported their predictions in a college population. However, Perlman (1974) suggested that deviancy from the norms depends upon the norms, that Stratten and Spitzer's results would theoretically fit a conservative population, but should predict the opposite in a liberal population (here sexual permissiveness should correlate with higher self-esteem). Perlman's results supported this: his moderate sample showed no correlation between permissiveness and self-esteem, while his liberal sample showed a positive correlation.

Looking at the problem in a slightly different way, Berman and Osborn (1975) reported a positive correlation between sexual permissiveness and self-esteem for men, but not for women, supporting the idea that the critical factor in self-esteem is congruence with norms for one's own subgroup. Men are normatively expected to gain self-esteem from sexual conquests leading to coitus, whereas women are not expected to do so.

Religiosity

Ira Reiss (1965) has suggested that sexual permissiveness would be associated negatively with religiosity (measured as church attendance), since such permissiveness would be regarded as a deviation from the church-going subgroup's norms. His attitudinal questionnaire supported his predictions in college and high school samples. This negative correlation between sexual permissiveness and religiosity has been substantiated by some researchers (Middledorp et al., 1970; Ruppel, 1970; Sutker et al, 1970; and Zuckerman et al., 1976), while lack of any strong correlation has been found by others (King et al., 1976; Miller & Wilson, 1968). It has been suggested that part of the reason for these conflicting results is that measuring church attendance does not tap into all the complexity of religiousness; that some measure of the amount of influence exerted by one's religion is also needed.

Political Conservatism

Political conservatism has also been suggested as another cluster of norms which would be negatively associated with premarital sexual permissiveness (Joe & Kostyla, 1975; Maranell et al., 1970; Middendorp

et al., 1970; Perlman, 1974; and Reiss, 1965), while this relationship is denied by others (Bayer, 1977).

Therefore, in view of these previous findings and their lack of clean agreement, it seemed worthwhile to include measures of self-esteem, political conservatism, and religiosity on a sexual values and behaviors questionnaire designed for a college classroom.

Method

Ninety-five unmarried women under 25 years of age who were enrolled in a sophomore-level family relationships class filled out a six-page questionnaire (15 minutes) concerning demographic data, premarital and extramarital sexual attitudes, premarital sexual activities, self-esteem, political conservatism, and religiosity (as influenced and as church attendance).

The questionnaire was originally designed as a teaching aid, to generate data from which the instructor could show each class a profile of its own attitudes on romantacism and premarital sex; and relevant questions were added over the years, as students raised questions about themselves as a group. Then a year ago this questionnaire was revised, and refocused to measure student expectations for themselves as opposed to their expectations for others, and to test for correlations between sexual behaviors and sexual attitudes. Questions on self-esteem, religiosity, and conservatism were included since past literature seemed to suggest that these three are good predictors of sexual behavior and attitudes.

Due to uncertainties in the literature as to which commonly used

self-esteem instruments most accurately measure a college student population, we used (1) the 32-item Spence-Helmreich Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI), (2) the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosen), and (3) a straight-forward 1-item self-evaluation question, "How high do you rate your own self-esteem?", on a 1 to 6 scale.

Religiosity was measured by two self-report questions: "How strongly do you consider yourself influenced by your religion?", and "How often do you attend church in an average month?" The religious influence question was asked at the end of page 2, while the church attendance question was asked at the end of page 3, so the answers would be relatively independent, and so the students would be reminded of their church attendance record only after they had been asked about religious influence.

The political conservatism measure was a single question, "Generally, how do you view yourself on most issues? Revolutionary Radical Liberal Moderate Conservative Very Conservative". This was positioned at the very end of the questionnaire so as not to remind the subjects of this data before they had filled in the rest of the questionnaire.

This questionnaire was administered to an entire family relationship class at the beginning and end of the semester.

There were too few men to analyze properly, so we used the data from the 95 unmarried women who were less than 25 years old, and analyzed them (1) as a whole group, (2) as the virgin subgroup, and (3) as the sexually-experienced subgroup.

To analyze the data, we ran an SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) computer-calculated Pearson correlation on data from these 95 women. The self-esteem, conservatism, and religiosity questions were correlated with themselves, and with the sexual behavior and sexual attitude questions.

Results

Extramarital Sex

These unmarried women were clearly against extramarital sex, perhaps reflecting the lack of reality of this question for these not-yet-married women, but the strength of this disapproval varied according to the subjects personal sexual background. Seventy-five percent of the virgin women emphatically disapproved, while only 60% of the sexually-experienced women did so.

Premarital Sex

There was again general agreement, but this time in favor, perhaps reflecting the reality of this question for these young unmarried women. In answer to questions about being free to engage in sexual activities if in love, or avoiding or resisting such temptations, 70-80% of both virgin and sexually-experienced women were supportive of premarital sexual activities and opposed to resisting such temptation. This consensus broke down when the question dealt with the normalcy of such premarital sexual activity. Now 65% of the virgins thought such behavior was not a normal part of growing up, while 68% of the sexually-experienced women thought it was normal. Thus, while there were opposing

majority opinions on this question. within each subgroup there was fair agreement between that subgroup's own sexual behavior and its view of the normalcy of such behavior: each subgroup generally viewed its own behavior as part of normal growing up.

Supportive evidence for this association between attitude and behavior came from the Pearson correlation analysis, where there was in the sexually-experienced group a .42 correlation between frequency of reported sexual intercourse and an expressed attitude favoring being free to engage in sex if two people are in love. Again, approval of an activity and participation in this activity went together.

Therefore, this suggests that if self-esteem is indeed related to the goodness-of-fit between one's attitudes and one's behaviors, and if both the virginal and the sexually-experienced subgroups generally approve of their own sexual behavior pattern, then there should be no association between sexual permissiveness and self-esteem.

Self-Esteem

This expectation was borne out by the results from the whole class: there was no significant correlation between self-esteem and either measures of self-reported sexual activity or with attitudes toward premarital sex. There was also no significant difference in the mean of the self-esteem of virgins versus sexually-experienced women.

Within the virgin subgroup, there was this same lack of association between self-esteem and attitudes toward premarital sex. Within the

sexually-experienced subgroup, there was also a lack of association between self-esteem and measures of the amount of sexual activity. However, there were significant correlations between self-esteem and attitudes toward the sexual activities that were being participated in. Generally there was a moderate trend to have higher self-esteem the more a sexually-experienced woman approved of premarital sexual activity. This supports the suggestion that self-esteem is at least partially a reflection of the goodness-of-fit between one's personal attitudes and behaviors.

Insert Table 1 about here

It is also noticeable that the three measures of self-esteem do not give the same results. The TSBI 32-item measure shows the greatest correlations with sexual attitudes, whereas the 1-item self-evaluation measure shows almost no correlations. This is interesting and unexplained.

Religiosity

The two measures of religiosity (church attendance; self-evaluation of religion's influence upon one) showed remarkably close results, even though these two items were sidely separated on the questionnaire.

As predicted by most of the past literature, there was a moderately strong association between increased religiosity and decreased approval of and participation in premarital sex in the group as a whole. This is reasonable and logical in view of the anti-premarital-sex attitudes supported by most churches. However, this association was weaker in the

sexually-experienced subgroup, as was also found with political conservatism.

Insert Table 2 about here

Political Conservatism

This sample of college women supported the general finding that political conservatism is associated with sexual self-restraint. The 1-item self-evaluation measure of political conservatism showed a general moderate association between being more conservative and both opposing premarital sexual activity and practicing it less often. This held for both the class as a whole and the sexually-experienced subgroup, however the association was weaker in the subgroup actually participating in premarital sex.

Insert Table 3 about here

Changes During a Semester

We also looked for significant changes in sexual behaviors or attitudes during the semester of exposure to a family relationships course.

(1) We had expected a rise in the number of women in favor of using birth control at all times. This rise did not occur; probably because at the beginning of the semester 95% of the women already favored this.

(2) However, there was a behavioral change. Ten percent of the sexually-experienced group changed from "usually use birth control" at the beginning of the semester to "always use birth control" at the end of the semester.

(3) There was also a 15% drop in the percent of women who indicated they strongly want at least one child. The issue of childlessness was covered in class, but there was no proselytization in favor of zero population growth or any other attempt to counteract, the traditional association between marriage, children, and adulthood. Therefore, this drop in percent of women wanting a child may be interpreted to mean that they were never strongly interested in parenthood but has not previously realized that childlessness after marriage is a respectable option.

Conclusion

The main finding of this study that relates to public policy is that, in general, sexually experienced unmarried college women do not have lowered self-esteem. Instead, there seems to be an association between goodness-of-fit of a woman's attitudes and behaviors and her self-esteem, and also an association between political conservatism or religiosity and sexual attitudes.

Therefore, there seems to be no reason to regard increased sexual permissiveness as a mental health problem, or a public morale problem. Instead, it seems that mental health (as measured by self-esteem) remains high as long as women's sexual attitudes agree relatively well with their sexual opinions--as long as they think they are behaving

properly.

This is in agreement with previous findings that self-esteem is positively associated with congruence between behavior and the norms of ones subgroup (Berman & Osborn, 1975; Perlman, 1974), but extends the concept of subgroup beyond the usual conservative vs. liberal or religious vs. non-religious. Instead, the important groupings for relating self-esteem to sexual permissiveness become: (1) acting according to ones own attitudes, versus (2) acting against one's own attitudes.

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Table 1

Self-Esteem Measures: Correlations Between Premarital Sexual Attitudes and Self-Esteem in a Sexually-Experienced Sample of College Women

	Self-Esteem Measures		
	TSBI	Rosenberg	1-Item
Premarital sex part of normal growing up	.37**	.21	.03
If in love, am free to have sex	.45**	.23	-.02
Should avoid premarital sex, usually	-.28*	-.32**	-.19
Should help partner resist temptation	-.44**	-.37**	-.31**

* .05

** .01 level of significance

Table 2

Religiosity: Correlations between premarital sexual attitudes and behaviors and religiosity

	Religiosity			
	Church Attendance		Influence of Religion	
	Whole Class N=95	Sex. Exp. N=48	Whole Class N=95	Sex. Exp. N=48
Premarital sex part of normal growing up	-.51	-.50	-.50	-.46
If in love, am free to have sex	-.51	-.31	-.52	-.32
Should avoid premarital sex	.50	.34	.48	.37
Should help partner resist temptation	.60	.43	.57	.35
Frequency of sex per month	-.47	-.35	-.45	-.29NS

All at .01 level, except where indicated.

Table 3

Political Conservation: Correlations Between Premarital Sexual Attitudes and Political Conservatism

	Political Conservatism	
	Whole Class (N=95)	Sexually Experiences (N=48)
Premarital sex part of normal growing up	-.52	-.51
If in love, am free to have sex	-.53	-.37
Should avoid premarital sex	.42	.33
Should help partner resist temptation	.37	.14n.s.
Frequency of sex per month	-.40	-.31

All at .01 level, except where indicated.